



Silvia Kolbowski. *Model Pleasure, Part 7*, 1984. Black-and-white photograph, 25 x 35" (63.5 x 90 cm).
(Photo: courtesy the artist)

Representation and Sexuality

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Over the past decade there has occurred, across a body of dis-

courses, a significant shift in the way we conceive of the text. The demise of the author as transcendent self or bearer of meaning has borne along a rejection of the text as discrete or self-contained object; attention has been focused, instead, on a model that poses meaning as constructed in the discourses that articulate it, in an interactive context of reader and text. Against the expressionist model, based on an expressive self and an empathic reader, who reduplicates preconstituted meanings, recent theory has proposed a reader who is positioned to receive and construct the text, a historically formed reader shaped in and through language. The shift is hardly unprecedented: it was in the thirties, after all, that Brecht insisted on the work's incompleteness without the viewer's active participation, and on the determining role of social conditions in the process of meaning production.¹ Moreover, the direction merely confirms an age-old awareness that texts "read" differently at different periods, according to the discursive formations in effect. They are dependent for meaning on given conditions of reception, on relations of context and use, on social formations that are laid into place—on what Hans Robert Jauss has referred to as the "horizon of reception of the audience."² It is ideology's work that fixes such meanings as timeless and immutable, above the field of material conditions, rather than as shifting, in process. The movement from analysis of artistic

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1. See Sylvia Harvey, "Whose Brecht? Memories for the Eighties," *Screen* 23, no. 1 (May-June 1982): 55-56, for a discussion of Brecht and reader-text relations in general. Throughout this essay, my analysis is informed by a variety of sources of which the most central are Jane Gallop, *The Daughter's Seduction: Feminism and Psychoanalysis* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1982); Juliet Mitchell and Jacqueline Rose, editors and translators, *Feminine Sexuality: Jacques Lacan and the École freudienne* (London: R. W. Norton, 1982); Annette Kuhn, *Women's Pictures* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982); Judith Mayne's several essays in *New German Critique* and the photographic criticism of Victor Burgin, notably as collected in Burgin, ed., *Thinking Photography* (London: The Macmillan Press, 1982).

2. Hans Robert Jauss, *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*, trans. Timothy Bahti (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982).

